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RELIGION IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

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In discussing the possibility of teaching religious truths in the public schools, the first thought which will occur to anyone is the great number of forms which religious organization and expression have taken in our country. There have been times in the history of mankind when the people of a given nation were connected with but one church. That time has long since passed. Especially in our own country is it true that no form of religious activity can command anything like a majority of the people. In other words, any one church is in a minority, and the main question of difference numerically between churches is merely how small this minority may be.

Remembering also that the public schools belong to all the people, and not to any one portion of them, it at once becomes imperative that we should consider whether it is possible to isolate out from the phenomena of religious thought, as expressed in its manifold forms, those which are common to all, which, in short, belong to religion in itself, and not only to any of its particular modes of expression. If that should prove possible, it would at once become practicable to embody such common truths in the teaching of the public schools, as belonging to all, and not to a few. Such truths would almost fall under the ancient category, "*Quod ubique; quod semper; quod ab omnibus.*"

Attempts have been made thus to isolate common religious doctrine. One such attempt may be cited as an example. Pro-

fessor Votaw of The University of Chicago, in a paper presented at the meeting of the Religious Education Association, in 1908, expressed his view in the following words:

What do we mean by religion? Is religion to be identified with ecclesiastical organization, creed, ritual, and emotionalism, so that when those are dismissed nothing remains? In most of the discussions over the Bible and religion in the public schools, this seems to be the point of view. The partisan advocates of particular sects, the zealous guardians of religious liberty, and the vigorous opponents of everything called religious, all join hands to keep the Bible and religion out of the public schools.

But this conception of religion so generally held by Christians differs from that held by Jesus, whom we Christians profess to follow. He did not make religion to consist in ecclesiasticism, or in doctrinal belief, or in ritualism, or in emotionalism. He gave to his followers no ecclesiastical organization, no theological creed, no ritual or ceremonial system, no standard type of emotional experience. To him religion was an ideal of life. Religion meant righteousness, the doing of God's will, the possession of the qualities of character described in the Beatitudes, the doing of the good and helpful deeds described in the Sermon on the Mount and the parables, the love to God and love to men in which the law and the prophets were summarized, the practice of justice, mercy, and faith, the weightier matters of human obligation which men were leaving undone. This was what religion meant to him, and this is what religion should mean for us.

Religion, therefore, as interpreted by Jesus, and by all Christianity that has been faithful to his teaching, and by the Hebrew prophets upon whose foundation he built, means reverence, trust, obedience, faithfulness, industry, sincerity, honesty, truthfulness, righteousness, justice, purity, honor, kindness, sympathy, helpfulness, health, and happiness. Religion is an ideal of life. For all these qualities and acts the actual teaching of Jesus can be cited, and his own example shown. These qualities and acts therefore set forth the ideal of life which religion at its best proposes.

This list of the essential religious ideas is extremely interesting. It seems to me, however, that it is fatally defective. It comprises a code of conduct—a code perhaps complete, and certainly very comprehensive and important. Such a code of conduct in its essentials, it is true, is found in every form of religion. It is found also in every formulation of ethics. It seems to me, however, that the code in question is not itself either a system of ethics or a system of religion. Ethics, as I take it, comprises two essentials: the first being a code of conduct; the second being the motives for action under this code.

It is not enough to present to anyone a mere list of desirable moral actions. Least of all is that possible with one who is young. He may be told never so often that he should not lie or steal, but always the question occurs, *Why?* The natural instinct is to do that which seems to give an immediate advantage; falsehood and theft are obvious means to such ends. Queen Elizabeth, we remember, is said to have defined a lie as a convenient means of meeting a difficulty. That which so commended itself to the great queen it will readily be seen commends itself even more pressingly to young and untrained minds. How, then, shall one be taught that this immediate advantage, if gained at all, is at the sacrifice of a far greater advantage, and one which can plainly be shown to be pressing and important? In other words, the motive for each form of moral regulation must be present, must be clear, must be pressing in its nature, or the regulation in question becomes a mere abstract dictum with no practical bearing on life.

Passing a step farther, it may readily be admitted that ethics, in other words a system of conduct and a system of motives for such conduct, is an essential part of every form of religion. But it is also equally plain that religion means more even than this. No system can be considered a religion unless it embodies certain ideas with regard, for instance, to God, to the human soul, to the relation of the human soul to the Divine, the future life, and the relation of conduct in this life to the life hereafter. It will at once be seen that in these ideas we find the motives for ethical conduct which transform ethics into religious ethics, and which supply the powerful springs of action in daily life. Strip away the ideals relating to the Divine Being, or to the future life, or to both, and we have left a system of ethics for which some other motive must be supplied than the religious. Other forms of motive may be supplied, but in this case we have secular ethics and not religious ethics.

Such secular ethics may plainly be shown to exist. There are other motives for right conduct than the religious motive. The motive of desire to attune one's own soul to what is believed to be the Divine purpose, on the one hand; or the motive either

of hope or fear regarding the future life, on the other, may be regarded as obvious forms of religious motive. On the other hand, the desire on the whole to do that which accords with the general social welfare, either now or in the far future, is a purely secular motive, and yet one conceivable as operating powerfully to influence conduct. Again, it may fairly be claimed that a large proportion of right conduct in society, as we understand it, results from one or two other motives: either a sense of self-respect leading one to avoid actions which he regards as beneath him, on the one hand; or a desire to confirm the respect of one's associates, on the other hand. All these together are secular and non-religious motives.

Turning now to religion in this sense, it is plainly apparent that theology, if we may use that term as applied to the body of doctrine which seems to be associated with every form of religion, can by no means be dissociated from sectarianism. Of course I use the term "sectarianism" in no derogatory sense, and merely for the lack of a better and more colorless word to express the idea. It is impossible to formulate any body of doctrine with regard to God or the relation of the human soul to the Divine, or to the future life, without embodying some particular form of theology, which will be in accord with the views of a certain class of people, from which other classes will strongly dissent—and this is sectarianism. From this fact it at once appears that religion, or even religious ethics, cannot be taught in the schools without teaching some form of sectarian religion. Practically, this is even more obviously the case, because such teaching must from the nature of things be in the hands of one who is actuated by the ideas of some form of sectarian religion, or possibly by one who is antagonistic to any or to all forms of religion. It is extremely difficult for anyone to teach either the history or the philosophy of a form of religion which meets his own approval without being more or less unconsciously biased against those which do not meet his approval. Such teaching, it needs no argument to show, would be out of place in the public schools which belong to all the people of all classes.

Again, even if it were desirable to teach religious truths of this character in the schools, it is extremely unlikely that they could be taught to advantage by the ordinary secular teacher. These teachers are trained to educate in certain lines of life. They have, in general, a more or less definite idea as to their own form of religious doctrine and practice. They have not, however, been trained in the really difficult science of theology, and much less trained to educate in such science.

It follows, therefore, that if such instruction should be given it could hardly be done adequately excepting by the clergy, and this at once, if the instruction were given in the public schools as now organized, would import into those schools the clergy of every form of religious thought in the country. It needs only to state this supposition to show at once its impossibility. One need not dwell on the very obvious results in the way of contention and infelicity which would be found in every school of this kind. It has sometimes been suggested that such teaching might well take place in the school building after school hours, children attending only such lessons as might be given by the pastor approved by their respective parents. It is difficult to see how the situation would be affected by having the instruction given after four o'clock rather than before four o'clock, for instance. Surely there is nothing sacred in a particular hour of the day. The conditions would be essentially the same, whatever the hour, and the results would invariably follow.

There remains, of course, another hypothesis. Religious schools, that is, schools under religious control, might be organized by any denomination, and taxes for school purposes assigned them proportionately. This would make it possible to support at the public cost schools like the present public schools in which no religious instruction is given at all, and at the same time schools in which instruction is given by Catholics, by Methodists, by Presbyterians, or any other religious body, as the case might be. It may be said that not a few in our community urge this as being just. Their ground is that they regard no teaching as adequate unless religious teaching is made a part of it; that one fundamental principle of education

from their point of view is the religious atmosphere in the school; and that if the present system is maintained they are compelled from a sense of duty to establish and maintain schools at their own cost to carry out these ideas. Inasmuch as they at the same time must pay taxes to support the schools in which religion is not taught, it is very obvious that they must pay doubly toward education. This they regard as unjust.

If we consider this suggestion we are at once confronted with the fact that there is hardly any political doctrine which our experience has more firmly embedded in the national consciousness than that of the separation of church and state. This is not merely a vague political theory, either; it is a conclusion reached by our people as the result, in the first place, of a long experience of the union of church and state in Europe, and what we believe to be the extremely unfortunate consequences in leading to repression of free thought, and to dissension of the bitterest description. In the next place, it is based on experience in this country. The Virginia Statute of Religious Liberty of 1776 was brought about because the people of that state became convinced that there was no safety for democratic institutions if the state supported any one form of religion. Again, in Connecticut, one church was supported by taxes until 1817, when the constitution was changed to put that state also on the general basis of separating political and religious activities. It is true that the Constitution of the United States puts no inhibition on the states in this respect, and that therefore any state may, if it sees fit, provide for supporting either the public worship or the education of any particular church or of all churches, at its will. At the same time, in the constitution of every state will be found a distinct prohibition on the state government toward using the public funds for any such purpose; and this is the expression, as I have said, of a public conviction almost universal and deeply rooted. Whatever benefits might be conceived to follow from the plan contemplated I greatly fear would be far more than counterbalanced by the innumerable and complicated evils of a partnership between the state and the churches, or any of them. The possibilities of dissension, especially of

contention over the proper distribution of the public funds, are interminable.

Another grave result would follow. Many of us believe, and believe strongly, that whatever benefits may be conceived to flow from the atmosphere of religious life in which those of the same faith live and work together, and teach and are taught apart from others, are far less than the incalculable benefit to the national life derived from the union in the same school of those of all political parties, of all religious views, of all races. It is the fusion of these which forms a republic such as ours, which makes it possible for people of conflicting races and creeds to live together in peace, in mutual respect, working out the common interest of the Republic, without confusion, without dissension. This would be lost if we should isolate those of each faith in its own separate church schools, and the loss would be enormous. Moreover, as a part of this loss would be, I greatly fear, that mutual respect which those of different views learn for one another when they live and work together. Isolation almost invariably means a lack of common understanding, and that means prejudice, and prejudice means hostility. In the interest, then, of the welfare of the Republic, based on union of thought and action, our common schools, as they are, seem to many of us as yet the last word of social science in the direction of an enduring republic.

There remains the important question as to whether ethics, secular in character, can be taught in the public schools; and, further, as to how it should be handled. This question is a vital one in our public life. I am convinced that those who insist that character is the first consideration in our early education are right, and that the state cannot afford by its education to bring up a set of young people who are intelligent and intellectually acute, but conscienceless. The proper training of character, therefore, in the public schools should be, undoubtedly, a matter of the most earnest attention. We should cease merely talking about it and it should be carried into practice in every school-room in the land. It should be made a part of the training of every professional teacher, and should be foremost in the

thoughts of all to whom are intrusted the destinies of our young. It is obvious that ethics of this character involves, as has been pointed out, a code of conduct, and at the same time an adequate presentation of the motives of action which lie back of the code. It is not enough to have a formal teaching of these principles, although that in its place is valuable, but the teaching should permeate the entire school life; should be made a part of the instruction in every school subject; should be present in the life of the school in its every day and every hour of work; should be the primary thought in the mind of all the teachers all the time. This is entirely possible, and if handled in that way there can be created in every school not merely a definite body of knowledge to be imparted, but what our friends of the religious schools call an atmosphere of the utmost inspiration. In the organization of this work I repeat that among others it seems to me that the most important and the most easily presented motives are the two of self-respect and the respect of one's associates. Few things are more powerful in determining one's conduct than the opinion of his fellows, and the teacher should endeavor in every way to build up in the school a body of opinion with regard to certain specific lines of conduct which will powerfully reinforce what may come from his lips. Other motives are so remote that they become very shadowy. It is true that to some extent children can be taught the duty of certain lines of conduct as, on the whole, improving the society in which they live. It is not impossible to make this a motive, but with the many it will be so far removed as to have little force; and so far as benefit to remote posterity is concerned, one is tempted to remember what Sir Boyle Roach said, "Why should I benefit posterity? What has posterity ever done for me?" On the other hand, I am inclined to believe that a vast number of very upright persons are affected slightly or not at all by the religious motive of conduct, and that their correct conduct comes primarily from one of the two motives to which I have referred. A sense of personal dignity and self-respect it seems to me should be the first; and many a man refrains from falsehood or dishonesty not because he fears the Divine displeasure,

not because, on the other hand, he fears the penalty of courts of law, but because he respects himself so much that he scorns what he regards as an unworthy action. This is a worthy motive, and entirely capable of translating into constant action, even with the very young.

Of course it may be added that such treatment of ethical questions by no means displaces a further treatment which superadds to the secular motive—which in fact all should have—the possible religious motive, but leaves that to be added in the home and in the church, by parents and by the clergy. It is true that in many cases parents are not keenly responsive to these questions. It is true, also, that in many cases children outside of the schoolroom are not subject to church control, and that the Sunday school has a far smaller part in their lives, if it has any part at all, than have the daily hours in the schoolroom. All that that means, however, is that the church needs—and by the church I mean every form of religious activity—the church needs to devise new and more efficient ways of influencing the public life. We are acting on old lines devised and carried on in centuries past; we need new lines of activity to be devised as applied to the conditions in the twentieth century. This is the problem of the church today, and if it is losing its hold on the public mind it is not, I believe, because it is not put in control of the schools, but because it has not learned as yet what the twentieth century means. When the church has learned that it will resume its former position of powerful influence on the entire community.

One thing more should be said. There is one matter with regard to religion in the public schools which the church may legitimately claim, and that is negatively, if you please, this: that the school should not teach directly or by indirection anti-religious doctrines. It is no more the right of the public school to teach atheism than it is to teach any form of religion. Moreover, in this same connection, the public schools should teach a respect for every form of religious organization, and the utmost fairness and justice in dealing with them. It is impossible to discuss history without crossing the lines of religious controversy. It

is impossible to teach many forms of social thought without coming in contact with the diversities of religious doctrine and action, as found in daily life.

We should discuss this question without bitterness. It is not wise, on the one hand, for those who disapprove the present system to stigmatize our public institutions as Godless schools; it is not wise, on the other hand, for those who believe in the advisability of maintaining this secular character of public education to assail others as bigoted religionists. There can be no doubt that each side embraces people of the utmost integrity of thought and of earnest moral purpose. The question should be discussed solely on its merits, and we should try to reach conclusions as a body of American citizens, respecting one another, recognizing the weight of opposing convictions, and seeking only the highest good of the young intrusted to our charge. In the words of our great President, in short, we should act "with malice toward none; with charity for all."